

All tracks lead to Jigalong

Doris Pilkington Garimara wrote of her mother's trek along the rabbit-proof fence. Now comes the sequel - her own journey, writes Tony Stephens.

It's a long way from Jigalong, on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert, to Los Angeles, or from Jigalong to London, to Rome, Tokyo, Madrid and New York. It's a long way but it's all part of Doris Pilkington Garimara's journey of learning and teaching. And Doris's family are very good at long journeys.

The *Herald* caught up with her in Los Angeles, just before she left for Anchorage, Alaska, where a granddaughter lives with her family. Pilkington Garimara is back home in Perth now and will return after Christmas to her other home in Jigalong.

Which did she prefer, LA or Jigalong? "Well, Los Angeles isn't too bad, but I still want to go home. It's all go, go, go, here and in New York and the other places."

She remembers her father at times like this, back home: "My dad taught me patience. He said, 'You never be in a hurry, girl. Just sit and wait. You have a cup of tea; you sit there and enjoy it. You enjoy the conversation that's going round.'"

Pilkington Garimara, who had never been out of Australia until a few months ago, has been touring the world with film director Phillip Noyce to promote *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, based on her book, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. "It is the final step in my journey of healing," she said.

She wrote the book as an adventure story about three young Aboriginal girls, including her mother, who triumphed over the odds and government officials by escaping their captors, evading their pursuers and making their long journey home. However, many readers and audiences have seen the book and film as testaments to the stolen generations.

"It has a universal language, about the importance of family and family values," the author said. "The rabbit-proof fence could be a symbolical umbilical cord."

Pilkington Garimara went from Scotland, where the movie won the Audience Award at the Edinburgh Film Festival, to Oslo, where she and the film received a standing ovation and locals told her that Norwegians had treated Laplanders in much the same way as

Aboriginal Australians had been treated. In South Africa, she saw the cemetery at Soweto, with adults on one side and an almost equal number of children on the other. "It will haunt me for the rest of my life," she said.

In Tokyo, Pilkington Garimara discovered that her book, which has sold about 60,000 copies, is to be published in Japanese. She went to Rome and Madrid, where Italian and Spanish translations are being considered.

She went to Dublin and to London, where the screening was attended by human rights activist Bianca Jagger, writer Salman Rushdie, singer Kylie Minogue and human rights lawyer Geoffrey Robertson, QC, who said the policy of removing half-caste Aboriginal children from their families was one "that we can now see is genocide". Pilkington Garimara spoke about being scared of her Aboriginal father when she finally met him, after years of being conditioned by her white guardians to believe such people were evil "devil worshippers".

Pilkington Garimara tells her own story in a new book, *Under the Wintamarra Tree*, a sequel to *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

The first book told how Molly Kelly, probably 14 at the time, and her younger sister-cousins, Daisy Burungu and Gracie Fields, were taken in 1931 from Jigalong, in the East Pilbara, to Moore River, 130 kilometres north of Perth, in accord with the belief that part-Aboriginal children were more intelligent than their darker relatives and should be isolated and trained as domestic servants and labourers. A.O. Neville, chief protector of Aborigines in Western Australia, told a conference in Canberra in 1937: "We have power under the act to take any child from its mother at any stage of its life ... Are we going to have a population of 1million blacks in the Commonwealth or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there ever were any Aborigines in Australia?"

The girls didn't like the Moore River settlement. Molly decided they would walk home. Since Jigalong was on the rabbit-proof fence that ran the length of Western Australia, Molly reckoned that, if they headed east to the fence and then north, they couldn't miss. The walk of about 1600km took nine weeks. It is one of the most remarkable feats of endurance, cleverness and courage in Australian history, dramatising a dark side of the Australian story.

Molly and Doris's forebears, the Mardudjara people, had left their desert homelands in the

face of white settlement to make Jigalong their permanent "sitting-down place". Molly married Toby Kelly, an Aboriginal stockman, a few years after her walk from Moore River and Doris was born under a wintamarra (mulga) tree on Balfour Downs station, where the couple worked. When the premature baby arrived, Molly cut the umbilical cord with a butcher's knife, tied the knot and put her in a shoe box. Molly called her baby Nugi.

"Nugi, that's a stupid name," said Mary Dunnet, whose family ran the station. "Give her a proper name; call her Doris."

Doris defied a doctor's prediction and lived to tell the tale. As her birth was unregistered, the Department of Native Affairs later issued her with the birthdate of July 1, 1937, in line with government policy and much as all racehorses are registered with August 1 as a birthdate. It was the year that A.O. Neville made his historic statement.

Molly Craig had another daughter, Anna. Molly was taken back to Moore River, this time with two daughters. Doris was never to see many of her relatives again, including her beloved grandmother, Bambaru Banaka, who was blind but hunted kangaroos with young Doris, using her granddaughter's eyes.

Molly Craig absconded again in 1941, carrying 18-month-old Anna about 1100km to Meekatharra, where they picked up a lift the rest of the way to Jigalong.

It must have been a Sophie's choice for Molly. Pilkington Garimara says that her mother left her at Moore River because she couldn't carry two girls. She knew that Doris would be cared for by Gracie, who was also back at Moore River.

Doris survived the settlement, where she was beaten for speaking her native tongue. Long walks to the cemetery for children's funerals became "a regular event", although she enjoyed Christmas Day - there were no presents but "Jesus's birthday was a wonderful day". She was taken at the age of 12 to Roelands Native Mission, where she was told Aboriginal culture was evil. When Doris discovered her father was a Mardu, full-blooded Aborigine, she was ashamed. The girls marched to the dining hall singing:

"Steadily forward march to Jesus we will bring

Sinners of every kind the Lord will take them in ..."

She became a nursing aide in 1955, the first of the mission girls to qualify for a career

outside domestic labour. She married and had four children. Jigalong nearly slipped from her daily consciousness, but not quite. Pilkington Garimara says in *Many Voices: Reflections on Experiences of Indigenous Child Separation*, a new National Library of Australia publication, that an aunt had told her before she left Moore River: "Don't forget who you are. Your mother's name is Molly Craig and you come from Balfour Downs."

Doris finally found her parents again at Christmas 1962, when the father she had never really known hugged his daughter and her four children and taught the quality of patience.

"I used to admire and envy the women of the Western Desert," Pilkington Garimara says in *Many Voices*. "I used to think, how can I get that peaceful, dignified look of a desert woman? You learn it and what you learn is acceptance, tolerance ... Of course, me and my pride who thought I knew everything, had to sit down and relearn, be re-educated by my mum, aunts and grannies.

"Mum took me over to this wintamarra tree and showed me where I was born ... This is my birthplace, playground. It's a symbol of love, my mother's love, grandmother's love, father's love and care, and all those lovely warm things about family that I missed out on all those many years ago."

Pilkington Garimara is relearning her Mardudjara language. She will resume lessons at Port Hedland and return to Jigalong in the new year to practise, with Molly, now 86, and the others.

Anna was taken away at two years and told she was an orphan. Anna's children, Helen and John, will visit Jigalong with their aunt. Anna has said she is not interested in the past. Molly, however, has not given up. "All I want is to hold my daughter, just once, just one time."

***Under the Wintamarra Tree*, by Doris Pilkington Garimara, is published by University of Queensland Press, \$24.**